

Rock Solid Living (1): Eternal Hope

1 Peter 1:1-12

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If there is one thing that is pretty much guaranteed to get a church audience to sit and pay attention to a sermon, at least for the first 30 seconds or so, it is to begin a message about suffering; how can someone keep a belief in God when bad stuff goes down in their life?

I have conversations with lots of people about why they struggle to believe, or feel that they can no longer believe. "I grew up in a believing home. But then this thing happened to me. How am I supposed to think there's a loving God when that happened? How could he let it occur?"

How can I believe in a God who lets earthquakes kills thousands in Nepal?

How can I believe in a loving heavenly father, when it seems he allowed church groups to abuse helpless first nations children in residential schools?

How can I believe in a caring Lord when my child died? When I developed this handicap... Lost my job... was raped.... the accident..... how?

Maybe they could believe in the early days when Jesus was around, and shortly after. Maybe back then. But not now.

I hear that sort of thing a lot.

We've talked about some of the concerns here before. And we'll go back to it again in the future.

Today we're launching a new sermon series here at KCRC, one that grows out our last one – which looked at the wobbly, stumbling, uncertain life and faith of one of Jesus' best friends, Simon Peter. It was rocky faith, set within a rocky relationship between Jesus and Simon.

Go ahead and pull out the yellow study guide that came as an insert in your bulletin. Make your notes so you can dig deeper during this week. Write your questions or comments in the bottom section, tear it off and drop it in the offering plate – and we'll think about them together later in the service.

We're moving on to spend the next few weeks looking at a letter that Peter wrote some years after Jesus returned to heaven. If you want to open your bibles, we'll be going to 1 Peter 1:1-12 today – p.1176

This letter of Peter has a whole different look and feel than that "wobbly pop" sort of faith we've seen in past weeks. This is a strong letter. It has a sure faith. It is confident.

It has the look and feel of a secure believer in Jesus – the Peter we've come to know down through history, who tradition tells us became the first bishop of Rome.

So – what happened?

Something changed along the way. That much is sure.

But what was it? What changed Simon from being a mild-mannered kind of Clark Kent figure to a high-flying, super hero figure of faith in Jesus?

And here's the part that especially will leave you wondering about that change -

Has to do with the encounter we witnessed last Sunday between Simon and Jesus. It happened on a beach, over breakfast. Recorded in John 21:18-19.
Jesus gives Simon a sneak peek at what will happen to him.....

18 "I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don't want to go."
19 Jesus said this to let him know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, "Follow me."

Do you know what this meant?
Ancient writings from that time period tell us that the phrase "*stretch out your hands*" was a phrase that always referred to crucifixion.

When you are old you will stretch out your hands....
What do you think Jesus was telling Simon?
How would YOU like to be told that one day you will be tortured to death?

Jesus says - "*Buddy, you're going to be tortured to death. Just want you to know that. So, now get out there and follow me; get out there and put into practice everything I've taught you – till you get arrested and murdered.*"

That's the last exchange we read that happens between them.
After that things change.
We open the book of Acts, and now Simon becomes Peter the Rock.
He preaches the first recorded sermon, and 3000 people are converted.
He takes charge of the church in Jerusalem.
He gets arrested, has a close brush with death – and experiences a miraculous escape.
And then, some years later, while he's in Rome, he writes a letter to Christians who had been scattered through various communities – probably scattered because of persecution.

All to say that suffering was very real, very severe, and very ongoing in the lives of the earliest believers in Jesus.

Not one of them began to follow the Lord expecting in some way that this faith would provide them a "get-out-of-jail-card" regarding suffering.

Nobody came to faith during the early days of the Jesus movement with some sort of naive expectation of faith providing them health and wealth.

It is simply not so that believing then was easier than believing today – that they didn't have to deal with the thorny question of suffering and evil.

If anything, it was more in their face than it is in ours. Yes, we have hard times. I don't want to belittle anyone's struggle with cancer, or the hard road of grief after the tragic loss of a loved one, or the shock of losing your job.

But on the whole – life for us in Eastern Ontario in 2015 is a lot safer, richer, healthier and easier than for anyone in Peter's day.

They knew all about suffering.

They all experienced it.

And YET.....

they believed anyway!

They believed in Jesus, and they followed Jesus with a full-on, eyes-wide-open understanding that this commitment to Jesus made suffering a pretty much sure thing. It might even mean they'd be murdered.

And they believed anyway.

The question for us is - "How is that possible?"

Cue today's bible reading – the opening section of Peter's letter to those Christians scattered by persecution; his words of encouragement to suffering believers somewhere's around 60AD.

And I wonder if it will give any encouragement to us, making us ready to face the inevitable speed bumps that we'll encounter on the highway of life and life.

What do you think?

Ready to read?

Let's pray together and then we'll dig in -

O Lord our God

In the quiet of this moment, we pray that you would teach our hearts
where and how to seek you,
where and how to find you.

Great God, we are not trying to claw our way to your holy heights,
for we know that our understanding is in no way equal to the task.

But we do want to understand a little of your truth
which in our heart we believe and love.

And believing, we crave to understand more of You.

And understanding,

to experience you.....

..... to truly know you in ever-richer ways.

Through Christ we ask, Amen.

1 Peter 1:1-12 – p.1176

There are three things in these opening words that I'd like you to notice – three themes. And these three themes are the foundation on which everything else in Peter's letter is based.

Without these three things, everything else crumbles to bits – for struggling believers in the early days, and for believers who suffer today.

Top of the list is the assurance – v.1-5 – that the faith which you're part of, and which is snuggled deep in your heart is something way bigger than you.

It comes from somewhere bigger.

It is about someone bigger.

And it is being guided by someone far, far bigger than you.

Meaning that it is not all up to you -

- up to you to get it right
- up to you to hold it together
- up to you to ensure it keeps going

Really – it is not all up to you!

Do you believe that about faith in Jesus; about YOUR faith in Jesus?

I often have the sacred opportunity of walking alongside friends in faith who are struggling. And they sometimes worry – *Do I have enough spiritual momentum to make it to the end? Do I have enough faith energy to keep going? I am so imperfect, when is this all going to collapse around me? What if Jesus comes back while I'm still struggling with my doubts? What if I die while I'm in the middle of having slipped and succumbed to a bout of temptation?*

Hey, reality is that there's not a single one of us here today who is strong enough and sure enough and pure enough to guarantee that everything's going to work out ok for them.

Not one.

If you think you are, come back and chat in 6 months. We'll see again then.

The faith I have is a result of the mysterious, holy, powerful work of God in my life.

Exactly how that all works – honestly, I'm not fully sure.

I've read lots of books by some pretty confident-sounding smart guys who think they have it all figured out..... but really – do they? Do they really understand the full way and means and plan of the Sovereign, Eternal God?

Best we can say is what Peter the Rock says – check out v.5: “...*through faith [you] are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*”

God has you.

God will protect you.

God will hold you.

God will make sure you make it.

So relax! It's not all up to you!!

And did you notice verse 2?

God the Father knew you before you were even born.

Jesus his Son shed his blood for you.

The Holy Spirit of God is at work inside you, making you holy.

So relax! It's not all up to you!!

And did you notice verse 3 & 4?

Here's a reason why taking history class really matters. History, friends, **IS** important. In fact, there's one event in history that makes ALL THE DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD.

That event is the historical resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

That event of the resurrection – true fact – real.... in time – makes ALL THE DIFFERENCE.

And the promise is that all who, with all their questions and weakness and stumblings and failures – like Simon Peter ---

all who surrender their lives to the control of God
are guaranteed a place in that eternity.

We have been born again.

Our eternal future is secure.

NOT because we are so strong, so great, so smart, so morally right.

But because Jesus rose from the dead.

His resurrection changes everything.

Absolutely everything.

The persecution of Nero can't take that away.

Taliban beheadings can't take that away.

The ridicule of classmates can't take that away.

Your moral failing – remember *that* one? Of course you do, it still haunts you, doesn't it? -
it can't take that away.

Because the Resurrection of Jesus is spiritually stronger than any of that.

And the strong work of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit – binds us to that Resurrection.

If it had not happened, everything else is up in the air.

A giant “whatever” - take it or leave it.

But there really is this fact: Jesus rose from the dead.

God raised him.

Death couldn't stop him.

Evil couldn't hold him down.

Jesus is alive. Forever. In radiant, pure, perfect, powerful, eternal wonder and life. Beyond anything we can hope for or imagine here on earth.

And the promise is that though Jesus we get to experience it, too, one day.

For sure.

No matter what comes into our lives.

If you take nothing else away from this morning, please remember that.

THAT, friends, is what made all the difference for Simon Peter.

Nothing could touch him – because Jesus rose from the dead.

Not even the promise that he, Simon, would one day be crucified.

Death wasn't scary any more – he already had died and risen through Jesus.

He was, already now, beginning to live eternal life.
He was there!

And fellow believers – so are we!!

That's the first, and by far the biggest, thing I want you to take home.

Two more – and we'll have to do the “lite” version of these.

Second point – You are going to struggle.
Maybe because of persecution.
Maybe because of an attack from the devil.
Maybe because of natural disaster.
Maybe because you're human.
But you will struggle.

And struggle will do a couple of things:

1. Suffering has this amazing ability to flush out of our head any silly notion that we are invincible. It reminds us that we are weak, limited, puny people.

Which drives us to our knees in dependance and prayer.

Never a bad thing.

And it keeps us from becoming overconfident or arrogant, where we start taking silly risks or making dumb choices that can come back to bit us or others.

2. Struggles in this life help us to remember that what we see is not the best of what we'll get. It keeps us from getting all preoccupied with lining our nest by getting and getting more, with experiencing stuff, with throwing all our energy and resources at some goal in the here and now – be it a secure retirement, a beautiful house, a bigger entertainment thrill, a shinier toy, a promotion at work, the eye candy spouse.... whatever.

We get too dependant on these things, and eventually they all crack... or rust.... or cheat on us.

They all eventually fail.

Struggle reminds us that the only thing which remains shiny and strong and sure and dependable is the eternal future that God the Father holds in his strong hands.

A future that we will inherit because of Christ's sacrifice.

A future that the Spirit reminds us of, and prepares us for a little more every day.

You know, I've pastored hundreds of people over the years.

And never met anyone yet whose life was free from suffering somewhere along the way.

Don't wig out, don't panic, when struggle comes, as it inevitably will.

Take the reminder that it brings about how human you are.

Keep your eyes on the goal of eternity.

And open your heart and mind and body to welcome the strengthening presence of the Lord to get you through the struggle, and to make sure your arrival in glory.

Last thing – Treasure this truth.

You have the awesome privilege of knowing about Jesus.

And of knowing him!

There are millions of people down through history, and even today in various parts of the world, who have not had that privilege.

You do – treasure it.

Give thanks for it.